

Red Karat

by Addictive Personality

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Summary: A Sorceress is the only person capable of seeing the red threads that stem between destined partners. By interpreting them, they guide their patron towards the one they are meant to be with. Riku is already a happily married man with a wife and son. Yet everything he knows is turned upside down when he is informed by a young Sorceress that someone else is out there waiting for him.

Red Karat

A/N: Welcome to the first chapter of this new story. With 'Simple Movements' finished, I wanted to start something new. I realize I have other things I haven't updated in quite a long time, but for the moment, this will take priority. Let's see how things go. Thanks for reading, and enjoy.

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<p>Red Karat

Chapter 1

Birthday

* * *

<p>The early morning news gave them an unfortunate broadcast for the day. With the meteorologist spouting off about a high chance of rain, their plans for a beach birthday party were clearly dashed. But they weren't without options. They did have a covered back patio leading into the garden, and it was going to be put to good use. A large circular table was set out on the dark stained wooden floor. Set with a blue tablecloth and decorated with a plethora of colorful plastic plates and utensils, Riku went about with some last minute efforts in putting together round two of their son's party.<p>

Riku wiped away at the thin layer of sweat building on his forehead as he finished putting up the streamers along the interior of the patio. Balloons were attached here and there, and lamps were strewn about creating a warm atmosphere. Beyond the safety of the covered floor, the skies were dark and wet. The rain that fell wasn't hard, but it was enough to be heard and noticed. Riku looked into the rather large garden, the rose bushes neatly trimmed and a single willow tree swaying in the light breeze. He let out a small sigh before taking a step down from the ladder he had been using. Hearing a pitter patter of footsteps, Riku turned towards the double glass doors that led into the house.

"Daddy!"

A small shadow leapt at him, colliding with his stomach and forcing the pair back. Riku smiled as he raised the young boy into his arms and faced him directly. "Hi buddy, what do you think of the decorations?"

"I love them! You and mama did a good job!"

He nuzzled his nose against the equally silver haired boy's, making him giggle. "Stop it daddy, that tickles!"

"That's the point, I want it to tickle."

From the door entrance, a fiery redhead stood with her arms crossed and a dish towel in hand. "Rue, come back inside. You need to take a bath before everyone gets here."

The young boy tried to hide himself in Riku's arms, only to peak out of the corner of his eye. "Do I have to?"

"Yes, now come on."

Looking up to plead with his father, Rue offered him the biggest puppy eyed look he could muster. Glancing from the redhead to his son, Riku could feel the encroaching glare from his wife and quickly admitted defeat. "Sorry bud, do as your mom says."

Setting him down, Rue shot Riku a betrayed look before running back into the house. Riku smiled at his wife, noticing that her hair was pulled into messy pigtails. "Haven't seen you with your hair like that in years, Vanille."

She rolled her eyes at him. "It gets it out of my way. If you haven't noticed, we're going to have a house full of screaming kids in an hour. You should finish out here and help me in the kitchen."

He closed the distance between them and placed a hand against her cheek. She eyed him quizzically before letting out a huff and giving him a peck on the lips. "Come on you."

From the kitchen windows, they could see that the rain had intensified. Riku stood at the marble island countertop chopping up fruit and placing it into bowls. Every once in a while he'd raise his head to see the clock nearing the allotted time. With the snacks taken care of, Riku sat his knife down and went to the sink to wash his hands. Turning on the water and pumping a liberal amount of soap

from the dispenser, Riku went about cleaning up. He ran his right pointer finger over the length of his left ring finger, tracing the thick red line that lay around it. If he were to ask Vanille to show him her left hand, he'd see a similar marking on her finger as well. This red "ring" was what bound them, irrevocably, as destined soul mates.

Everyone in the world was bound to someone. It was a natural law. Children were born with a single red dot on their left ring finger. As they aged, the dot would slowly begin to grow outwards, creating what would eventually become a ring. However, every person was completely different. The growth of their ring did not have a time frame. There were those that in their teenager years the two ends of their ring would meet, signaling that their destined partner had been found. Then there were those on the complete end of the spectrum in years beyond their youth, and their rings had yet to form completely. Fate was fate. That was just how the world was.

So for those that had a complete ring, how did they go about finding their partner? It was here that a third party was needed. Sorceresses lay in every corner of the world, and these magically gifted women were the only ones that could see the red threads that linked two individuals together. They were powerful, wealthy people and held more influence in comparison to politicians and political leaders. You could be the most powerful ruler of a nation, but if it meant a lifetime of solitude, even they knew their limitations.

Once a person's ring was complete, they would make the pilgrimage to the holy temple of a Sorceress at any point, make a monetary offering, and have their ring examined. From there they would receive a "map" of sorts, giving the individual general directions and paths to follow that would bring them closer to their destined partner. It wasn't handed to them on a silver plate. A person still had to work towards meeting their other half. The Sorceresses felt this was a means to give them time to reflect on themselves, prepare them for what was to come. And once they reached that moment, that casual stroll along the sidewalk where one accidentally bumped shoulders with someone else, that thread would make itself visible and link their rings together. This was the life that everyone led.

"Riku, I'm going to jump in the shower real quick before they arrive."

"Got it, I'll finish up here."

Vanille flew up the stairs and the soft opening and closing of a door echoed. Riku placed the bowls of fruit he had chopped up in the refrigerator along with the other snacks Vanille had been working on. He saw the cake sitting royally in the center of the second wrung of the fridge, an elegantly written "Happy 6th birthday!" displayed in dark blue icing. Feeling the corners of his lips pulling up into a devilish grin, Riku reached with a finger towards the icing only to bolt upright when he heard his phone ringing.

"Jeez," he muttered to himself closing the fridge door, "it's like they knew."

He grabbed the black phone off the kitchen island and glanced at the screen. Blinking a few times, he swiped the talk button and raised it to his ear. "Hey, what's happening?"

For the next ten minutes or so, his phone kept buzzing. And with each phone call he received, it only got worse. With the rain common sense went out the window and apparently, a car accident happened on the bridge everyone had to drive over to make it to the birthday party. All lanes were blocked off and there was no indication of when they would be opened back up. Rue's friends and their parents weren't going to be able to make it after all. With the last parent cancelling, Riku sat his phone down and let out a dejected sigh. "What am I going to tell him now?"

It was a horrible feeling as a parent having to tell your child that nobody was going to be there for their party. And it didn't matter if he said they could hold it on another day when they could all make it. After all, when you're a six year old, it's difficult to hold your emotions in and not be disappointed beyond belief. And as Riku explained this to Rue who was all wrinkled from being in the tub too long, he could make out the distinct tears in his eyes and not the water dripping from his silver hair.

The rain didn't let up as evening fell on the fal'Cie residence. Riku and Vanille sat on a couch in the living room, the tv on, and empty plates with remnants of blue frosting on the coffee table. Vanilla was propped up against Riku, legs up on the couch cushion and pressed inwardly towards her chest. With her head slightly to the side, her hair met with Riku's shoulder. There was a sad expression on her face, and it shouldn't be surprising as to why. There was no sign of Rue anywhere. Since getting out of his bath, he had shut himself up in his room and was refusing to come out. They couldn't get him to eat his dinner, but left a large slice of his birthday cake with a lit candle on top of it near his door. Riku and Vanille watched from around the corner of the hallway, and were given a small glimpse that Rue would be okay when he opened his bedroom door a fraction of the way and blew out the candle. Within a few minutes, the cake was gone.

"What a crappy day," Vanille finally said out loud, placing her hands against her face and moving them in circular motions. "I'm exhausted."

"Me too," he replied stifling a yawn, "do you think he's asleep by now?"

Vanille noted the time on the tv. "It's not his bedtime, but I wouldn't be surprised if he's not tuckered out from him crying earlier. What rotten luck, of all days for this to happen, it had to be on Rue's birthday."

She threw her arms up, the action only reinforcing their frustration. Riku encircled an arm around her smaller frame and brought Vanille closer. "We'll make it up to him somehow. Maybe we can get him out of school for a day and take him to the amusement park."

"Why during a school day?"

Riku grabbed the remote and turned the channel. "There's less people. We won't have to wait in lines too long and he can have the place to himself."

Vanille's face softened a bit. "That's a good point, he'll like that."

What about work though, I can get the time off, but what about you?"

"My deadline's not until the end of the month, I'll get it done, don't worry."

"That's what you say and then you're scrambling to get your designs turned in," she said with a nagging finger.

"Cut me some slack, I'm thinking of our kid here."

The tv flashed brilliantly, a gossip channel showing the hosts talking excitedly. Vanille's attention immediately zeroed in on it and forced Riku to let out a disgruntled moan. "This again?"

"It's big news Riku!"

"It's been going on forever, I mean, what, how long are they planning on following the story?"

Vanille set her lips thinly. "It's not every day that a princess's ring completes. The entire world is going crazy over it."

Not having a choice in the matter, Riku watched with Vanille as the show hosts buzzed about Princess Ariel and her pilgrimage to see Sorceress Cinderella in a country far up north. The Map offered to the princess was rather vague, which to a princess normally having everything handed to her, didn't sit well with her. For months now, every gossip channel was talking about Princess Ariel's travels around the world in search of her destined partner. Riku was over it.

"Alright," he said getting up from his seat, "I'm going to check in on Rue and head to bed. Don't stay up too late rotting your head with this."

She slapped his lower back before Riku bent down to give her a kiss. "Give him one for me."

Riku picked up the plates from the coffee table and walked them over to the sink and then headed for the stairs. Up on the second floor, he traveled down the hallway and stopped at Rue's door. With a gentle push, he opened it and glanced inside. A soft, orange light permeated the room. He could see Rue bundled up on the floor next to his bed, a blanket strewn down from it and covering half of his body. And needless to say, he was sound asleep. "Let's get you tucked in."

Ever so carefully, Riku picked Rue up and placed him on his bed. With the covers now properly draped over him, Riku ran a few fingers through the thick layer of silver hair. He had to stop himself from laughing when he noticed the stains of blue frosting on the corners of Rue's lips. With the back of his hand, he softly cleaned him up and kissed his forehead. "Sleep well buddy, I'll see you in the morning. Mama and I love you very much."

With Rue on his way to dreamland, Riku walked to the end of the hallway and turned into his and Vanille's bedroom. It was spacious, with a large bed, walk-in closet, and connecting private bath. He slid into the bathroom, flooded it with artificial light and looked

at himself in the opposing mirror. The thirty year old man with shoulder length hair that stared back at him began showing the smallest of traces that he was growing older. Tiny wrinkles around his seafoam colored eyes seemed to grow more daunting with exhaustion and Riku only made it more apparent by scrunching up his face. Taking his toothbrush from the counter, he went about with his nightly routine. After brushing his teeth and washing his face, he grabbed a towel and dabbed at the excess wetness before stepping back into the bedroom. "I should sketch a bit before I call it a night."

There was a large briefcase off to the side of his bed. Riku sat down on the mattress and grabbed the case before opening it up. Taking a series of papers and a newly sharpened pencil, Riku went about casually working on the designs he needed to finish before the end of the month. As an architect, much of his time was spent drawing. His lines were clean, his shading producing a depth that gave his designs life. Riku's careful eye zigzagged every which way, each stroke of his pencil bringing him closer to his destination. It was quite easy to get lost in this process and before he realized it, midnight had come around. With sleepiness tugging at his eyelids, Riku placed his materials back in their proper place. Vanille had yet to come to bed and Riku figured she must have fallen asleep on the couch. Thinking that she'd make it up at some point, Riku stepped out of his jeans and white shirt and threw the covers aside. Sliding onto the cool material of the bed sheets, Riku let out a content breath. On the side table a single photograph lay framed in a green border.

He and Vanille were dressed in white. A beautiful, lacy gown with a long train fell behind her while Riku sported a suit so white it was almost translucent. Orange poppies and white anemones made her bouquet and a wreath of silver crowned her hair. They were offering the cameraman a happy smile, their hands cupped together, and their rings a vibrant red.

"_It's been eight years."_ He thought to himself. It had been eight years since they had gotten married, but many more they had been friends. Riku and Vanille were a rarity. They had been gifted with childhood friendship that continued into their adult lives. The pair watched as their rings grew with each passing year, their conversations often going into the realm of what kind of partner they would have. They parted ways when college came around as Riku ended up traveling internationally for school only to be brought back by the completion of their rings. It was actually a rainy night just like the one currently happening when Riku received a phone call from Vanille.

"_Riku's my ring's complete."_

He remembered the gutting feeling in his stomach when he heard that. "_Mine did too, Vanille."_

They finished their time at college and returned to their hometown in The Land of Departure. It was one of those rare times when a Sorceress wasn't needed. Upon seeing each other after four years, the red thread linking their rings together materialized. Riku remembered the happy tears that followed.

Riku traced his finger along the framed photograph before placing it back on the side table. It was then he noticed that the rain had finally stopped. Getting up and going over to the window, Riku pulled

the curtains aside to reveal the blackened skies. The faintest of star light seeped through crevices in the clouds, like water through the gaps in one's hand. Sliding the curtains back into place, Riku slipped back into bed. With one more long yawn, Riku allowed sleep to settle over him for the night.

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><p>Over the next few days Rue's friends made after school visits to the house to play and to bring the presents they were initially going to give him. Rue was a spunky, bright kid and it didn't take long for him to bounce right back. Of course, the gifts helped immensely with the healing process. What kid in their right mind would say no to shiny new toys and games?<p>

With the troubles of Rue's ruined birthday party in the past, their everyday life continued. He was off at school, Vanille at her veterinary clinic, and Riku busily working with demanding clients in the downtown business sector of The Land of Departure.

"Right, have them set up a meeting for next month. I'll be able to see them after the 1st so they should be fine with that."

Riku was driving along the highway, his headset on as he spoke to his secretary on the other end. There was nothing but blue sky for as far as he could see from his little spot on the bridge suspended over the ocean. Laying a bit more into the gas pedal, Riku sped on towards the city as he had several meet ups to make before going back to his office. His call was cut short by the overwhelming screeching of an overhead plane as it descended off in the distance. Clicking his headset off, Riku reached the end of the long bridge and melded into the nightmare that was downtown traffic. Fortunately for him, Riku knew the city inside and out and took a few detours to avoid the busiest of streets and drove in relative comfort. That was, until something unsettling caught his eye.

"What the--"

A building currently in construction was roped off by a high fence, yellow tape, and an assortment of notices clearly stating it was dangerous to be around, not to mention against the law. It wasn't a huge building in comparisons to the rest in downtown, maybe a good 20 floors. However, even at 20 floors, to see a child sitting on one of the ledges flailing their legs like it was some kind of swing was enough to make Riku hit the brakes. He knew better than to do that, as it earned him an earful of car horns and nasty words hurled at him from angry motorists that had to swerve around him. Riku immediately drove off to the side of the road and got out of his car. He looked around frantically, wondering how in the world nobody else had noticed what he saw.

"Is this for real?"

He ran up to the fence and tried to find an opening, but everything was securely locked in place. His heartbeat had escalated and the suit jacket he was wearing was beginning to feel like a suffocating vice. Riku walked up and down the street and managed to find the slimmest of gaps between the mesh wiring and a metal post. If he removed his jacket, maybe he could squeeze through. Perhaps it was for the better that those walking around and driving by were off in

their own little worlds as they were not paying him any attention. Taking his jacket off and leaving in the backseat of his car, Riku sucked in his chest and planted himself as close to the post as he could. Holding his breath, Riku managed to get through. Once out in the base floor, all manner of materials and equipment were strewn about. He wasn't an architect for nothing and quickly found the temporary elevator that he could take up to the top floor.

The elevator cranked its way up. Riku's hands were nervously clenched together with sweat now clinging to his chin. As soon as the doors flew open, Riku swiftly stepped out onto the unfinished floor. A breeze swept past him, sending silver hair into his face. He worked it behind his ear as his attention zeroed in on the young child sitting ever so comfortably at the far end. All the while just flailing their two tiny legs over a dangerous ledge.

"Alright, Riku, just go slowly."

He inched his way forward. No sudden movements. Riku couldn't risk scaring the child and creating a worst case scenario. With each step he took, he could feel his heart in his throat. It could have been Rue, his own son, on that ledge. As a parent, this was the most frightening thing in the world to him. Dribbling nervous sweat, Riku was now five feet away. And then the child stopped swinging its legs. He froze.

"It's very kind of you to worry, but it's not necessary."

The voice was feminine and held a tone beyond what a child should be capable of. The now identifiable girl placed both arms behind her and craned her head over her shoulder. She bore bright orange-red hair and equally colored eyes. Shrouded in a white and purple dress ending at her knees and feet laced up in light brown boots, the young girl grinned. "How do you do?"

Riku couldn't get any words out. The young girl giggled before returning to gazing out into the cityscape. "Like I said, you don't need to worry. I'm quite capable of taking care of myself."

It took Riku a minute or so to find his voice, and even then he still spoke cautiously. "Are you okay?"

"Of course I am," she replied with a cheery tone, "I like the view from here. It's just high enough to see over to the ocean."

Riku remained where he was. "I'm afraid I have to ask, but where are your parents? Can I bring you back down and I can get a hold of them for you?"

"No need, my guardians are aware of what I'm doing."

"_Guardians?"_ Riku thought. _"What kid refers to their parents as that?"_ He cleared his throat and dabbed at the sweat that had collected on his face. "Alright—|is there anything I can do to help you right now?"

An unexpectedly loud rumble came from the girl's direction. She pursed her lips and looked over her shoulder again. Riku found her expression finally befitting of a child. She was hungry. And that was a look he knew all too well. "Why don't we get something to eat,

sound good?"

She mused it over for a few seconds before nodding enthusiastically. "Yeah!"

Without any hesitation, she swung her legs back over and got up. It chilled Riku to the core. She walked up to him, coming barely up to his hip and offered a grin. "Thank you for treating me."

"O-f-of course," he spat out, "come on, let's get down from here."

Parental instinct kicking in, Riku reached out and took a hold of her hand with his left. She cupped her hand in his, the entire time admiring the red ring that lay around his finger.

Pizza seemed like a safe option for lunch. They didn't travel far until they reached a pizza parlor that was practically empty for the time of the day. Riku ordered drinks for the pair and within a few minutes had an order in. For the better part of 15 minutes he watched the young girl drinking from her glass, the fizzy lemon soda to her liking as she played drawing imaginary lines on the tabletop. "I've got paper and colored pencils with me if you'd like to draw."

"That's quite alright. It's more entertaining this way. It forces me to remember every line I have to make in my head."

The way she formed angles was intriguing to Riku as he simply observed. It wasn't much longer before they had a large pepperoni pizza in front of them. He didn't have much of an appetite, but forced a slice into his mouth. The girl wasn't shy. She hungrily attacked her pizza, smearing red sauce on her cheeks. Riku grabbed a few napkins and made a motion to wipe away at the sauce, but the girl stopped his hand with hers. "You're very kind."

He swallowed the bite in his mouth. "It's out of habit."

"Hmmm, is that so? It's interesting. The way you speak to me and handle yourself, it's like if you were a parent."

"That's because I am," he replied wiping his hand with another napkin. "I have a son about your age. His name's Rue."

"What a pretty name."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

They ate in silence for a while longer. She managed to polish off three large slices before asking the waitress for a refill on her soda. Riku knew he needed to get her back to her parents, and soon. But then the thought came to him: What kind of parents would let their child wander off? Especially into an unfinished building in the middle of the city. Perhaps he needed to get a hold of child protective services and let them handle this. Riku knew this wasn't a typical situation and it needed to be dealt with appropriately. He needed to start somewhere.

"I don't think I gave you my name. I'm Riku fal'Cie. What's yours?"

She looked up from her drink, her lips leaving the straw with a soft smack. "Mint."

"Mint?"

"Yes, my name's Mint. It's a pleasure, Mr. fal'Cie."

"You can call me Riku, Mr. fal'Cie is my father," he said attempting a more light hearted tone. "It's very nice to meet you Mint."

With lunch finished, Mint let out a satisfied sigh. "Thank you again."

"Of course."

Mint began drawing lines on the tabletop once again, her eyes finding themselves attracted to Riku's red ring. Her expression was difficult to place, but if Riku had to give it a name, it was pensive. Yet there was some sense of curiosity in there as well. He raised his hand, moving it back and forth for her to see. She smiled at this action. "Your ring is beautiful."

"That's very nice of you to say," he said with a tilt of his head, "one day I'm sure yours will be as well."

The redheaded girl leaned back in her seat, bringing her left hand up. A single red dot lay in her ring finger. "I've got a long way to go."

"But I'm sure it will be worth it in the end."

Mint giggled. "I'm sure it will." She let out a yawn. "Riku, you said you had paper and colored pencils with you."

"That's right, I did. Did you want me to bring them in?"

"Yes please, that would be wonderful."

He excused himself for a moment and went to pay their bill before venturing out to his car to retrieve his briefcase. Upon his return he handed Mint a sketchbook and a variety of colorful, professional-grade pencils and pens. Mint immediately went for the red pencils. With the sketchbook secured tightly in her hands, Mint began to sketch. Riku watched on in quiet amusement, the sounds of the strokes she was making almost rhythmic. After a few minutes, Mint placed the drawing utensil back on the table and carefully removed the page from the sketchbook. She folded it up into quarters before holding it out for Riku, palm open. He pointed at himself. "Did you draw something for me?"

"Yes, after all, you made an offering to me. I have to do my part."

He arched a confused brow. "Excuse me?"

Mint heaved her tiny shoulders. "Riku, I'm sure you're a smart man. When you make an offering to a Sorceress, she in turns provides you

with a reading and a Map with details of your destined partner. This is very common sense."

He must have heard incorrectly. Riku was staring at a little girl. A Sorceress was a woman of power and beauty with influence far greater than anything he could imagine. But that single fact paled in comparison to the other portion of her sentence. "My destined partner? Mint, my destined partner and I have found one another and have been married for eight years. We have a son together. I don't understand what you're trying to say."

It was here that Mint performed an expression conveying her frustration. She wiped the corners of her mouth with her napkin and got up. "Mr. fal'Cie, I am terribly sorry, but the thread you think binds you and your wife doesn't exist. I read and interpreted your ring and the thread that stems from it. There is still someone waiting out there for you."

Mint pointed to the paper in Riku's grip. She smiled at him as she neared the front door, a pair of robed figures standing outside. "Thank you again for lunch, I had a nice time. Good luck in your endeavors."

The bell at the door jingled and Mint walked out, waving at Riku before disappearing into the downtown of The Land of Departure.

Elsewhere, in another part of the world, Sora lay in bed. Facing the ceiling and hand elevated above him, a fiery red ring connected around his finger. Hazy eyes closed for a moment.

"Finally."

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Rue and Mint are characters from the PS1 game "Threads of Fate" (Dew Prism in Japan)

End
file.